Thai 'solution' may worsen situation

By Su-Ann Oh

THE uncertain plight of more than 140,000 refugees living in camps along the Thai-Myanmar border has become even more precarious.

On April 11, Thailand's National Security Council chief Tawin Pleansri announced that the closure of the refugee camps was imminent.

He added that the National Security Council, the institution that has overall authority over refugee issues, is in discussions with the Myanmar government and in contact with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) about repatriating the refugees to Myanmar.

This is disconcerting news to those living in the nine official refugee camps dotted along the porous border between Myanmar and Thailand. They fled from armed conflict and structural violence in the Karen, the Karenni and the Shan states on the eastern border as well as other parts of Myanmar. They had been exploited for their labour, food and money by the Myanmar military and its allied groups, which have been waging a long-standing campaign against ethnic insurgent groups since the 1960s.

What is behind Thailand's decision to repatriate the refugees? Mr Tawin declared that as a constitutional government had been installed in Myanmar, it was safe for the refugees to return.

The evidence for this is tenuous at best. On the day of the elections last November, fighting broke out between the Myanmar army and a former ally, causing more than 30,000 people to flee from the villages in the Karen State into Mae Sot, a Thai border town.

The majority were repatriated by the Thai authorities within the week. However, about 10,000 remain in the town in hiding, fearful of returning to their homes.

Moreover, refugees continue to arrive in Thailand on a daily basis. In the past five years, more than 50,000 refugees from the camps were resettled in other countries, but their places in the camps have been taken up by new arrivals.

The conditions that caused so many to flee from Myanmar have not changed. Reports from the Karen Human Rights Group document ongoing abuses by the Myanmar army against Karen villagers in their fight against the Karen National Liberation Army, including forced labour and portering, extortion of food, heavy restrictions on movement, and forced relocation.
For long-term refugees living in the camps, there may not even be homes to return to, as whole villages have been forcibly relocated to sites controlled by the Myanmar army.

Moreover, the border areas are heavily landmined, making it dangerous for people to travel. Indeed, the UNHCR - the agency given the task of determining whether safe repatriation may take place - has announced that it is not safe for the refugees to return.

The swearing in of a civilian government in Myanmar has not changed the overall objectives and strategy for dealing with ethnic insurgencies. In fact, conflict has increased.

On March 13, the 22-year-old ceasefire agreement between the Shan State Army-North and Myanmar army troops was broken. There have been reports of 65 battles taking place in that area in the last three weeks.

It would seem that Thailand is using the formation of a civilian Myanmar government as an excuse to rid itself of a long-standing problem which appears to have no foreseeable durable solution.

While Thailand has provided sanctuary to the refugees for more than 20 years, its stance on the issue has always been to ensure that their presence does not adversely affect its political ties with Myanmar.

Thus, it has always stressed the temporary and minimal nature of its humanitarian commitment. The decision to shut down the refugee camps appears to be its latest attempt to make this politically sensitive and potentially volatile predicament disappear.

The Thai government has announced that it has not decided when the camps will be shut down. It is likely that it will do so progressively, as the forced repatriation of smaller numbers over a longer period would attract less international attention and condemnation than a mass repatriation of more than 140,000 people.

It is understandable that the Thai government is seeking solutions to a dilemma that has persisted for years and may continue to do so. However, forcibly repatriating the refugees may prove to be a short-term solution.

Until the structural reasons for their flight from Myanmar are resolved, their only recourse, if sent back, would be to return to Thailand.

At present, the basic needs of the refugees in the camps are supported by international non-governmental organisations. Once Thailand dismantles the refugee support structure, it will be faced with a flow of refugees entering its borders as illegal migrants, adding to the estimated one million illegals already residing in the kingdom.

This begs the question: Would the solution be better than the current situation?

The writer is a Visiting Research Fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.